

Line Rendering and Iconic Reconstruction in the Realistic Formation of Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

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Abstract: While inheriting the spirit of traditional brushwork, contemporary ink figure painting continuously incorporates Western concepts of realistic modeling, forming a unique visual language system. This paper adopts a formal analysis approach, focusing on line expression as a core element to explore its functional evolution and aesthetic transformation within realistic modeling, and further analyzes how lines participate in the process of reconstructing the imagery of the painting. The study argues that the line in contemporary ink figure painting has evolved from the traditional “bone-like brushwork” into a multifaceted expressive system that combines figurative functions with independent aesthetic value, forming a unique “realistic imagery” in terms of character modeling, spatial structure, and emotional expression. The organic integration of the calligraphic, expressive, and modeling qualities of the line ensures both the objective authenticity of the figure and preserves the independent character of the ink-wash language, ultimately achieving an aesthetic realm “between likeness and abstraction.”

Keywords: Ink-wash figure painting, Realistic modeling, Line expression, Image reconstruction, Formal analysis.

1. Introduction

As a major category of traditional Chinese painting, ink-wash figure painting underwent profound transformations in the 20th century. Pioneers such as Xu Beihong and Jiang Zhaohua introduced Western realist concepts of form, breaking away from the traditional figure painting’s singular model of “capturing the spirit through freehand brushwork” and ushering in a new era of realism in ink-wash figure painting. Through the efforts of several generations of artists, contemporary ink figure painting has developed a unique character that differs from both traditional literati painting and Western realist painting. Throughout this developmental process, the line has consistently remained the most central formal element of ink figure painting. In traditional painting, the line serves the formal function of “bone structure and brushwork” while also possessing independent aesthetic value—the so-called “single-stroke painting” emphasizes the line’s inherent rhythm and vitality. Under the demands of realistic representation, however, the function of the line has undergone a profound transformation: it must not only sculpt accurate human forms but also express volume, texture, and spatial relationships, all while retaining the unique brush-and-ink charm characteristic of Chinese painting. This convergence of multiple functions makes the line a crucial entry point for understanding the formal language of contemporary ink-wash figure painting. This paper aims to systematically examine the expressive characteristics of lines in the realistic modeling of contemporary ink-wash figure painting from a formal analytical perspective, exploring how lines participate in the reconstruction of pictorial imagery while fulfilling the task of realistic modeling. Through this research, we hope to reveal the unique logic of the formal language of contemporary ink-wash figure painting and the aesthetic ideals underlying it.

2. Line Expression: The Functional Evolution from Traditional Conventions to Realistic Form

2.1. Linguistic Characteristics of Lines in Traditional Figure Painting

The lines in traditional Chinese figure painting possess a long history of evolution and a comprehensive system of conventions. From Gu Kaizhi’s “Gao Gu You Si Miao” (Ancient and Elegant Floating Thread Technique) of the Eastern Jin Dynasty to Wu Daozi’s “Chun Cai Tiao” (Water Shield Vegetable Stem) of the Tang Dynasty, and from Guan Xiu’s “Gu Guai Qi Ju” (Eccentric and Striking) of the Five Dynasties to Li Gonglin’s “Bai Miao” (White-line Drawing) of the Song Dynasty, painters throughout the ages have created a wealth of line-drawing techniques, which have been systematized into the “Eighteen Descriptions” [1, 2]. These line conventions serve not only as means of form-creation but also as independent aesthetic objects—the beginning, continuation, transition, and conclusion of the lines, along with their variations in weight, speed, and the interplay of thick, thin, dry, and wet, inherently constitute a “form with meaning.”

The core aesthetic principle of traditional line work is “bone method and brushwork.” In his *Classification of Painting*, Xie He listed “bone method and brushwork” as the second of the Six Principles, emphasizing the power, structure, and rhythm of brushwork. This approach to line does not seek to reproduce the physical reality of the subject, but rather pursues a “spiritual resemblance” that transcends superficial appearance—conveying the spiritual temperament of the subject through the rhythm, cadence, and momentum of the line. As Zhang Yanyuan stated in *Records of Famous Paintings Through the Ages*: “To depict an object, one must achieve likeness in form; to achieve likeness in form, one must fully capture its spirit and vigor; and both spirit and vigor, as well as likeness in form, are rooted in artistic

conception and realized through the use of the brush” [3]. It is evident that, within the traditional context, the line serves not only as a means of form-giving but also as a medium for conveying spirit and capturing the essence.

2.2. New Demands on the Line Posed by Realistic Form-Giving

In the early 20th century, with the introduction of Western realist painting concepts, traditional lines faced unprecedented challenges. Realistic form-giving requires the accurate depiction of a figure’s proportions, structure, volume, and spatial relationships, whereas the stylized expressive methods of traditional lines struggled to fully meet these demands. Xu Beihong explicitly stated that “sketching is the foundation of all figurative arts” and advocated for the integration of Western sketching concepts into Chinese painting [4]. In his figure painting practice, he experimented with using lines to outline contours while supplementing them with texturing and wash techniques to express volume, thereby initiating an exploration of the integration of line and form.

Jiang Zhaohua took this exploration a step further. In works such as *The Displaced People*, he creatively combined lines with ink-wash rendering. The lines not only served to outline contours but also, through variations in density and thickness at key points, suggested the transitions of volume, while retaining the brushwork and ink nuances characteristic of Chinese painting [5]. This approach shifted lines from traditional, formulaic representation to a more flexible, formative expression.

2.3. The Diverse Forms of Line in Contemporary Ink Figure Painting

Through the continuous exploration of several generations of artists, the lines in contemporary ink figure painting have evolved into a representational system characterized by the coexistence of diverse forms. Zhou Sicong’s lines possess the charm of traditional brushwork while incorporating intense personal emotional expression; in his *Miner Series*, the twisting, breaking, and overlapping of lines directly correspond to the inner pain and struggle of the figures [6]. Lu Chen, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the compositional nature of lines. He combines lines with planes and color to explore the modern transformation of the ink-wash language [7].

Artists such as Liu Guohui and Wu Shanming have further expanded the expressive power of lines. Liu Guohui’s lines possess both the calligraphic quality of traditional brushwork and the precision of realistic modeling, accurately capturing the figures’ movements and expressions through rapid sketching [8]. Wu Shanming, on the other hand, created a unique “soaked-ink technique,” in which lines form special textural effects through the diffusion of ink, serving both a modeling function and possessing independent aesthetic value [9].

These explorations demonstrate that the lines in contemporary ink figure painting have transcended the limitations of traditional conventions, forming diverse forms that both serve realistic modeling and maintain an independent aesthetic character. Lines are no longer the rigid application of fixed conventions, but rather a dynamic language that flexibly adapts to specific modeling needs.

3. Formal Analysis of Lines in Realistic Representation

3.1. The Correspondence Between Lines and Formative Structure

In contemporary ink figure painting, the relationship between lines and formative structure is the core issue of formal analysis. Unlike traditional lines, which adhere to established conventions, contemporary realistic lines directly serve the shaping of formative structure. Through a deep understanding of anatomical structure, the artist ensures that the direction, turns, and variations in weight of the lines correspond precisely with the figure’s internal skeletal and muscular structure.

Taking the depiction of the head as an example, when rendering the cheekbones, the lines often start light and gradually become heavier, forming a pause at the bony protrusions before turning downward with the natural flow; when rendering the mandible, the angle of the line’s turn directly corresponds to the physiological structure of the mandibular angle; and when depicting the neck, the direction of the sternocleidomastoid muscle determines the rhythmic undulation of the line. This correspondence transforms the line from a flat contour into one with a three-dimensional spatial orientation—allowing the viewer to perceive the form’s undulations and turns through the rhythmic variations of the line.

The renowned painter Fang Zengxian placed great emphasis on the correspondence between line and structure in his figure painting. In works such as *Shuo Hong Shu*, every turn of the line was meticulously refined to conform to anatomical structure while retaining the unique calligraphic charm of Chinese painting [10]. This approach makes the line both a means of modeling and an independent aesthetic object, achieving a unity of “form” and “brushwork.”

3.2. Expressing Line Texture and the Transition of Brush and Ink

Realistic modeling not only requires lines to shape forms but also demands the depiction of textural differences among various subjects. The softness and heaviness of fabric folds, the delicacy and roughness of skin, and the fluffiness and resilience of hair and beard all need to be rendered through distinct line textures. Contemporary painters have conducted extensive explorations in this regard.

When depicting the drapery of cotton garments, lines are often fluid and rounded, with subtle starts and finishes; when depicting woolen garments, lines are thick, heavy, and halting, with a slow brushstroke; when depicting silk, lines are light and ethereal, with smooth, rounded transitions. These textural differences are achieved not only through variations in line thickness and weight but also through the interplay of brushstroke speed, water control, and ink color variations. Artists have transformed the Western concept of texture in sketching into the brush-and-ink language of Chinese painting, achieving a transition from “tracing” to “writing.”

Zhou Jingxin’s “Ink-and-Wash Figures” series is representative of this approach. He creatively combines lines with ink washes, using thick lines to outline the contours of clothing folds, supplemented by light ink stippling to depict surface transitions, and employing negative space and highlights to convey the lustrous quality of silk [11]. This treatment maintains the dominant role of lines while enriching

the means of expressing texture.

3.3. The Spatial Constructive Function of Lines

Within the realistic modeling system, lines also undertake the task of constructing spatial relationships. Traditional Chinese painting uses the density and contrast of lines to handle two-dimensional spatial relationships, whereas realistic modeling requires lines to suggest three-dimensional space through front-to-back, near-to-far, and solid-to-void relationships.

Contemporary painters typically employ the following spatial techniques: first, using variations in the solidity and transparency of lines to depict depth—with lines in the foreground appearing solid and heavy, and those in the background appearing transparent and faint; second, using contrasts in line density to suggest spatial depth—with dense lines in the foreground and sparse lines in the background; and third, using the direction of lines to guide the viewer's gaze across the composition, creating a psychological sense of space.

Yuan Wu's figure paintings are distinctive in their treatment of spatial lines. In his series *Anti-Japanese United Army*, he outlines foreground figures with bold, heavy lines while rendering background figures with light ink and dry brushstrokes; the transition between solid and faint lines creates a clear spatial hierarchy [12]. At the same time, he intentionally emphasizes the calligraphic quality of the lines, ensuring that the spatial representation does not rely solely on natural perspective but retains the unique sense of planar composition characteristic of Chinese painting.

4. Reconstruction of Imagery: The Aesthetic Direction of Line Expression

4.1. The Transition from Objective Representation to Subjective Expression

While fulfilling the task of realistic modeling, the line always retains the potential to transform into subjective expression. This is the key distinction between ink-wash figure painting and Western realistic painting—the line serves both as a tool for representing objective forms and as a medium for expressing subjective emotions.

In realistic modeling, lines must accurately outline the contours and structure of figures, but this is not the ultimate goal. Outstanding artists are always able to infuse subjective emotion through the individualistic treatment of lines, building upon accurate form. Zhou Sicong's works from her later years reached an exceptionally high level in this regard. In her series *Highland Scenes*, her lines are concise yet rich in nuance; they not only accurately capture the figures' movements and expressions but also embody a deep affection for her Tibetan compatriots [13]. Such lines transcend objective representation, becoming a direct externalization of the soul.

The key to this transformation lies in the connotation of "writing" (*xie*). Chinese painting emphasizes "freehand brushwork" (*xieyi*); every stroke of the line is "written" rather than "traced." "Writing" implies that the lines carry the artist's vital rhythms and emotional states, serving as a direct manifestation of the artist's spirit. The lines in contemporary realistic ink figure painting likewise adhere to this principle;

even when confronting the most rigorous realistic forms, the artist maintains this "writing" state, rendering the lines both formal elements and emotional symbols.

4.2. The Calligraphic Nature of Lines and the Generation of Imagery

The calligraphic nature of lines originates from the art of Chinese calligraphy. Calligraphic lines emphasize "bone, flesh, blood, and spirit," stressing that every stroke embodies a sense of life. When this aesthetic principle is applied to figure painting, the line acquires an independent value that transcends its formal function—the line itself becomes an aesthetic object, and its beginnings, continuations, turns, and endings, as well as its dryness, wetness, density, and dispersion, all convey a unique aesthetic resonance.

In realistic representation, the use of calligraphic lines presents a particular challenge: on the one hand, it is necessary to ensure the accuracy of the form; on the other, the calligraphic charm of the lines must be preserved. Outstanding contemporary painters have found a balance between these two demands; they internalize their profound understanding of structural composition into intuitive responses of the hand, rendering the lines both precise and free, rigorous yet unconstrained.

Wu Shanming's "freehand figure painting" offers significant insights in this regard. He creatively employs residual ink, allowing the lines to develop natural blurring and texture during the writing process; the edges of the lines are not mechanical outlines, but rather vivid traces formed through interaction with the rice paper [14]. These lines possess both a clear formal direction and a rich element of serendipity; every stroke becomes an irreproducible moment of life. It is precisely through this process of "writing" that the figure is re-imagined—it is both an objective figure and the spiritual trajectory left by the movement of the line.

4.3. The Aesthetic Realm "Between Resemblance and Non-Resemblance"

Qi Baishi's assertion that "the essence lies between resemblance and non-resemblance" profoundly reveals the core of the aesthetic of imagery in Chinese painting. This principle equally applies to the realistic modeling of contemporary ink-wash figure painting—realism does not equate to merely copying the subject, but rather involves distillation and transformation based on grasping the subject's essential characteristics.

Lines play a pivotal role in this process of transformation. Through the refinement, generalization, and deformation of lines, masterful painters ensure that their figures retain objective recognizability while transcending concrete physical reality. They discard inconsequential details and emphasize the structural elements that best embody the subject's characteristics, striking the optimal balance between "resemblance" and "non-resemblance."

Liu Guohui's figure paintings embody this aesthetic pursuit. His lines are concise and precise; often, with just a few strokes, he captures the figure's movement and expression. Yet upon close examination, each stroke is not a mechanical imitation of the objective subject, but rather a highly refined "idealized" treatment [15]. For instance, when rendering drapery, he discards a multitude of trivial folds, retaining only a few main lines that best convey movement and texture. These lines serve both as a distillation of objective drapery and as a projection of subjective emotion.

This approach renders the figures in the painting both tangible and realistic, yet transcends individuality to attain universal significance. What the viewer sees is not a photographic reproduction of a specific individual, but rather an “image” created by the artist through a grasp of the figure’s essential characteristics—one that is more condensed than reality and richer in meaning. This represents the highest realm of the line’s participation in the reconstruction of imagery.

5. Integration and Innovation of Formal Language

5.1. The Interactive Relationship Between Line and Ink

In contemporary ink-wash figure painting, lines do not exist in isolation but form an interactive relationship with ink and flat planes. This interaction not only meets the requirements of realistic modeling but also enriches the formal language of Chinese painting.

The relationship between line and ink can generally be divided into three types: first, where line takes the lead and ink serves as a supplement, with lines dominating the form while ink aids in expressing volume and texture; second, where line and ink blend together, interpenetrating to the point where they are difficult to distinguish; and third, where ink dominates, with lines taking a secondary role or even being completely replaced by ink. Different artists choose different approaches based on their personal styles and expressive needs.

Tian Liming’s works represent a new exploration of the fusion of line and ink. He employs the “connected-line-with-shading” technique, allowing lines and ink to be executed simultaneously. Here, lines serve both as a means of modeling and as the boundaries of ink, while ink functions both as an expression of volume and as an extension of the lines [16]. This approach breaks away from the traditional separation of line and ink, resulting in a more unified and harmonious formal language within the composition.

5.2. Strategies for Integrating Sketching Techniques with the Language of Ink and Wash

How to address the relationship between sketching techniques and the language of ink and wash is a central issue in contemporary ink-and-wash figure painting. Sketching provides scientific methods for form-building, but if applied directly, it can easily lead to the dilemma of “having technique but lacking charm”; ink and wash embody the unique charm of Chinese painting, but if one clings rigidly to tradition, it becomes difficult to meet the demands of realistic form-building.

Contemporary artists have explored various strategies for integration. Some use sketching as a foundation but transform its relationships into the language of brush and ink, substituting shading and wash techniques for tonal values; others prioritize brush and ink but infuse a sense of form into their application, ensuring that every stroke reflects an understanding of structure; still others seek a new balance between the two, creating a wholly new language that possesses both the rigor of sketching and the poetic charm of brush and ink.

Li Bo’an’s exploration in *Leaving Bayankala* is particularly

noteworthy. Drawing on the rigor of Western realistic form while fully leveraging the expressive power of Chinese ink and wash, he uses bold, vigorous lines and deep, rich ink tones to create figures of intense visual impact [17]. This artistic language differs from both traditional ink wash painting and Western sketching; rather, it represents a creative fusion of the two systems.

5.3. Formal Innovation in Contemporary Exploration

In recent years, a new generation of painters has engaged in more diverse explorations of formal language. No longer confined to the “sketch + ink and wash” fusion model, they draw inspiration from a broader perspective to create richer forms of line expression.

Some artists draw on the expressive techniques of Western modern art, liberating the line from its purely figurative function and transforming it into an independent visual element; others absorb the formal language of folk art, rendering their lines more free and unrestrained; still others incorporate digital technology into their creative process, exploring new possibilities for line expression. These explorations have expanded the boundaries of the formal language in ink figure painting, infusing new vitality into the expression of the line.

Chen Mengxin’s meticulous figure paintings feature bold innovations in line work. He combines traditional line drawing with modern composition, using dense lines to create a rich visual rhythm; the lines serve both as a means of modeling and as independent elements that constitute the composition [18]. This approach grants the lines unprecedented formal autonomy while retaining the charm of traditional brushwork and ink.

6. Conclusion

Line is a core element in understanding the formal language of contemporary ink-wash figure painting. It serves the fundamental function of realistic modeling while preserving the unique charm of Chinese brushwork, acting as a key intersection point for the fusion of Eastern and Western painting languages. The lines in contemporary ink-wash figure painting have evolved from traditional stylized expressions into a linguistic system where diverse forms coexist. In terms of the correspondence between lines and form, the expression of line texture, and the spatial construction of lines, a rich vocabulary has emerged that serves realistic modeling while maintaining an independent aesthetic character. Line expression ultimately points toward the aesthetic goal of reconstructing imagery. Through the refinement, generalization, and transformation of objective forms, lines elevate the figure from concrete physical reality to a transcendent aesthetic image, achieving an aesthetic realm “between likeness and non-likeness.”

The future development of contemporary ink figure painting requires, while maintaining the ability for realistic representation, further exploration of the expressive potential of lines and the pursuit of more diverse methods for integrating formal languages. Artists must avoid the tendency to sacrifice the poetic charm of brushwork and ink for the sake of realism, while also guarding against hollow expressions that prioritize form over substance and detach from the basis of form.

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